

L O U N G E R.

[N^o LXVIII.]

Saturday, May 20. 1786.

THAT "Poet and Creator are the same," is equally allowed in Criticism as in Etymology; and that without the powers of invention and imagination, nothing great or highly delightful in Poetry can be achieved.

I have often thought that the same thing holds in some measure with regard to the reader as well as the writer of poetry. Without somewhat of a congenial imagination in the former, the works of the latter will afford a very inferior degree of pleasure. The mind of him who reads, should be able to imagine what the productive fancy of the Poet creates and presents to his view; to look on the world of fancy set before him with a native's eye, and to hear its language with a native's ear; to acknowledge its manners, to feel its passions, and to trace, with somewhat of an instinctive glance, those characters with which the Poet has peopled it.

If in the perusal of any poet this is required, *Shakespeare*, of all poets, seems to claim it the most. Of all poets, *Shakespeare* appears to have possessed a fancy the most prolific, an imagination the most luxuriantly fertile. In this particular he has been frequently compared to *Homer*, though those who have drawn the parallel, have done it, I know not why, with a sort of distrust of their assertion. Did we not look at the Greek with that reverential awe which his antiquity impresses, I think we might venture to affirm, that in this respect the other is more than his equal. In invention of incident, in diversity of character, in assemblage of images, we can scarcely indeed conceive *Homer* to be surpassed; but in the mere creation of fancy, I can discover nothing in the *Iliad* that equals the *Tempest* or the *Macbeth* of *Shakespeare*. The machinery of *Homer* is indeed stupendous; but of that machinery the materials were known; or though it should be allowed that he added something to the mythology he found, yet still the language and the manners of his deities are merely the language and the manners of men. Of *Shakespeare*, the machinery may be said to be produced as well as combined by him-

self. Some of the beings of whom it is composed, neither tradition nor romance afforded him; and of those whom he borrowed thence, he invented the language and the manners; language and manners peculiar to themselves, for which he could draw no analogy from mankind. Though formed by fancy, however, his personages are true to nature, and a reader of that pregnant imagination which I have mentioned above, can immediately decide on the justness of his conceptions; as he who beholds the masterly expression of certain portraits, pronounces with confidence on their likenesses, though unacquainted with the persons from whom they were drawn.

But it is not only in those untried regions of magic or of witchery that the creative power of Shakespeare has exerted itself. By a very singular felicity of invention, he has produced in the beaten field of ordinary life, characters of such perfect originality, that we look on them with no less wonder at his invention, than on those preternatural beings, which "are not of this earth;" and yet they speak a language so purely that of common society, that we have but to step abroad into the world to hear every expression of which it is composed. Of this sort is the character of *Falstaff*.

On the subject of this character I was lately discoursing with a friend, who is very much endowed with that critical imagination of which I have suggested the use in the beginning of this paper. The general import of his observations may form neither an useless nor unamusing field for speculation to my readers.

Though the character of Falstaff, said my friend, is of so striking a kind as to ingross almost the whole attention of the audience, in the representation of the play in which it is first introduced; yet it was probably only a secondary and incidental object with Shakespeare in composing that play. He was writing a series of historical dramas, on the most remarkable events of the English history, from the time of King *John* downwards. When he arrived at the reign of *Henry IV.* the dissipated youth and extravagant pranks of the Prince of Wales could not fail to excite his attention, as affording at once a source of moral reflection in the serious department, and a fund of infinite humour in the comic part of the drama. In providing him with associates for his hours of folly and of riot, he probably borrowed, as was his custom, from some old play, interlude, or story, the names and incidents which he has used in the first part of *Henry IV.* *Oldcastle*, we know, was the name of a character in such a play, inserted there, it is probable, (in those days of the Church's omnipotence in every department of writing), in odium of Sir John Oldcastle, chief of the *Lollards*, though Shakespeare afterwards, in a Protestant reign, changed it to Falstaff. This leader of the gang, which the wanton extravagance of the Prince

Prince was to cherish and protect, it was necessary to endow with qualities sufficient to make the young Henry, in his society,

*"doff the world aside,
And bid it pass."*

Shakespeare therefore has endowed him with infinite wit and humour, as well as an admirable degree of sagacity and acuteness in observing the characters of men; but has joined those qualities with a grossness of mind, which his youthful master could not but see, nor seeing but despise. With less talents, Falstaff could not have attracted Henry; with profligacy less gross and less contemptible, he would have attached him too much. Falstaff's was just "that un-yoked humour of idleness," which the Prince could "a while uphold," and then cast off for ever. The audience to which this strange compound was to be exhibited were to be in the same predicament with the Prince, to laugh and to admire while they despised. To feel the power of his humour, the attraction of his wit, the justice of his reflections, while their contempt and their hatred attended the lowness of his manners, the grossness of his pleasures, and the unworthiness of his vice.

Falstaff is truly and literally "*ex Epicuri grege porcus*," placed here within the pale of this world to fatten at his leisure, neither disturbed by feeling, nor restrained by virtue. He is not, however, positively much a villain, though he never starts aside in the pursuit of interest or of pleasure, when knavery comes in his way. We feel contempt, therefore, and not indignation, at his crimes, which rather promotes than hinders our enjoying the ridicule of the situation, and the admirable wit with which he expresses himself in it. As a man of this world, he is endowed with the most superior degree of good sense and discernment of character; his conceptions, equally acute and just, he delivers with the expression of a clear and vigorous understanding; and we see that he thinks like a wise man, even when he is not at the pains to talk wisely.

Perhaps, indeed, there is no quality more conspicuous throughout the writings of Shakespeare, than that of good sense, that intuitive sagacity with which he looks on the manners, the characters, and the pursuits of mankind. The bursts of passion, the strokes of nature, the sublimity of his terrors, and the wonderful creation of his fancy, are those excellencies which strike spectators the most, and are therefore most commonly enlarged on; but to an attentive peruser of his writings, this acute perception and accurate discernment of ordinary character and conduct, that skill, if I may so express it, with which he delineates the plan of common life, will, I think, appear no less striking, and perhaps rather more wonderful; more wonderful, because we cannot so easily conceive that power of genius by which it tells us what actually exists, though it has never
seen

seen it, than that by which it creates what never existed. This power, when we read the works, and consider the situation of Shakespeare, we shall allow him in a most extraordinary degree. The delineation of manners found in the Greek tragedians is excellent and just; but it consists chiefly of those general maxims which the wisdom of the schools might inculcate, which a borrowed experience might teach. That of Shakespeare marks the knowledge of intimacy with mankind. It reaches the elevation of the great, and penetrates the obscurity of the low; detects the cunning, and overtakes the bold; in short, presents that abstract of life in all its modes, and indeed in every time, which every one without experience must believe, and every one with experience must know to be true.

With this sagacity and penetration into the characters and motives of mankind, Shakespeare has invested Falstaff in a remarkable degree: he never utters it, however, out of character, or at a season where it might better be spared. Indeed, his good sense is rather in his thoughts than in his speech; for so we may call those soliloquies in which he generally utters it. He knew what coin was most current with those he dealt withal, and fashioned his discourse according to the disposition of his hearers; and he sometimes lends himself to the ridicule of his companions, when he has a chance of getting any interest on the loan.

But we oftener laugh with than at him; for his humour is infinite, and his wit admirable. This quality, however, still partakes in him of that Epicurean grossness which I have remarked to be the ruling characteristic of his disposition. He has neither the vanity of a wit, nor the singularity of a humorist, but indulges both talents, like any other natural propensity, without exertion of mind, or warmth of enjoyment. A late excellent actor, whose loss the stage will long regret, used to represent the character of Falstaff in a manner different from what had been uniformly adopted from the time of *Quin* downwards. He exchanged the comic gravity of the old school, for those bursts of laughter in which sympathetic audiences have so often accompanied him. From accompanying him it was indeed impossible to refrain; yet, though the execution was masterly, I cannot agree in that idea of the character. He who laughs, is a man of feeling in merriment. Falstaff was of a very different constitution. He turned wit, as he says he did "disease, into commodity."—"Oh! it is much that a lie with a slight oath, and a *jest with a sad brow*, will do with a fellow that never had the ache in his shoulders."

[To be continued.]

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